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INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT

In his own words: President Reagan explains to The Sun where he stands . . . from 'contras' and Congress to Soviet relations to Challenger inquiry

Washington Bureau of The Sun

WASHINGTON — The Sun's interview with President Reagan yesterday was conducted by Washington Bureau chief Ernest B. Furgurson, White House correspondent Robert Timberg, diplomatic correspondent Stephens Broening and military affairs correspondent Charles W. Corddry. Following is a text of the interview:

QUESTION: Mr. President, some members of Congress are proposing a delay in military aid to the "contras" [Nicaraguan rebels] to allow time for another attempt to draw the Sandinistas into negotiations with the contras. Would you accept some delay — if not six months, which I know you don't want — but some delay in providing military aid if that meant Congress would approve your request?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think there's several ways in which things like that are being suggested. First of all, from the time that they would — if they would vote to approve this aid, there would be a period of time before it would actually be carried out. And, yes, if there's any possibility that during that time and perhaps to forestall such aid, that they would then be willing to come to the negotiating table, as we've tried to get them nine times already, and to negotiate with the contras, that would be fine.

But if we're talking about some kind of a compromise where the Congress imposes a delay and takes the trigger away from me in —

Q: You mean like requiring a second vote?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, there would be a second vote, and so forth, I think this would be most counterproductive because the Sandinistas would feel they could hang on longer with the hope that we still wouldn't get what we're asking for.

Q: It sounds like the trigger is the problem. If, for example, a delay of, say, 60 to 75 days, after which the aid would go whether — without a second congressional vote, does that seem like the basis for a compromise to you?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'd be willing to talk to them about something of this kind. I wouldn't want to commit to this because, as I say, the important thing is that the Sandinista government must not be left any loopholes in which they believe there might — there still might be a denial of this help.

Q: So your real problem is the trigger in the second vote?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, yes. They have to know that we mean it and that we're going to help the contras.

Q: Mr. President, some administration officials have said that 18 months of military aid to the contras is all that will be needed to bring the Sandinistas to the negotiating table and that you will not be back for more. Alfonso Robelo, one of the contra leaders who you met

with here last week, has said he doesn't feel that any more than 18 months would be needed and he didn't feel that they would want to prolong the bloodshed there beyond that. What happens after 18 months and the contras have still not forced the Sandinistas to the negotiating table?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think this is something that you have to look at if such a time should come. But I'm

pleased that those men who are most familiar with resources of the contras have that feeling. They have — they are acquainted with their ability.

There is no question that when we were able to give them some help, the contras were giving the Sandinista forces great problems. But you've got to remember that for the last couple of years, other than the humanitarian aid, they were shut off. And that's why they're so limited in the numbers. They've got a potential force of around 20,000. There are about 6,000 now fighting in Nicaragua. But this is a matter of the lack of arms and munitions.

Q: Well, it does sound, Mr. President, that you're not saying that 18 months is necessarily the end of it and you might, in fact, have to come back for more. Is that correct?

THE PRESIDENT: I would — yes, I think it would be foolish to commit yourself to anything of that kind because this, too, then could stiffen the Sandinistas' resistance and say, "All we have to do is hold out for 18 months."

Q: Mr. President, you have said that the overriding issue in Central America is America's national security. You've also said, if I may quote, "We send money and material now so we'll never have to send our own American boys." Is it possible that some day American troops will have to be sent?

THE PRESIDENT: Here's the thing that everyone is overlooking. Here is this third communist — well, let — I can't call it an attempt. Here would be the third of the bases that they had established, the communist bloc, and the first one on our mainland. And they, themselves, have made it plain that they're part of the expansionist philosophy, that Marxian philosophy and belief of one world communist state.

Now, what you have to say is, if we do nothing and this is allowed to grow and expand and carry its revolution across other borders, then the threat would remain that there would come a day when their hostilities would be directed at our own interests. And that is the time in which you could say that, yes, then American forces would be involved because the hostilities were directed at us.

I don't see it as some interpret it that, well, we're leaving the door open — that we may still use troops down there. I don't think we'd have a friend left in Latin America if we used American forces. The image of the great colossus of the north is still too much in their minds. The contras don't want us. They want our help, they want the tools, they made it plain. They will furnish the manpower.

So, when I said three, I noticed you kind of paused and looked at each other there. Let me point out something that everyone is neglecting up there on the Hill to pay attention to. When we, in the Grenada operation, got possession of all those documents, as well as the arms and the weapons that were already installed in Grenada by the Soviet bloc, we got documents from the Soviet government, from the Cuban government addressed to the communists there in Grenada.

And over and over again they referred to that they had Cuba, they had Nicaragua, they had Grenada, and then they went on to discuss what the future goals were and the other targets there in Central America and the

Caribbean. So that there was no question about this being a target for Soviet expansionism, using proxies the way they have now with Cuba and all. So, the goal is made very plain.

Now, this is last — again, this threat that a Nicaragua could pose, when I was in Grenada the nine prime ministers of the tiny Caribbean Island nations unanimously, and they brought it up — I wasn't even discussing the subject. They brought it up to me. They said, "You must continue helping the rebels in Nicaragua because this Nicaragua, under this government, is the greatest threat to our existence," to those nine nations. So, we're not the only ones that see this as a cancer that must be excised.

Q: Now, as part of the request to Congress for aid to the contras, there is a provision that would allow the use of CIA contingency funds, and I was wondering, on top of the \$100 million that you're asking, I was wondering why is the use of these funds considered necessary and what would they be used for?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, because under restrictions that have already been put on us by Congress, we can't give advice, we can't offer training, we can't exchange intelligence information with the contras. And we feel that if we're going to help them with weapons and arms we ought to be freed of these restrictions and allowed to provide this other assistance to them.

Q: I see. By that other assistance, do you mean additional funding over and above the \$100 million?

THE PRESIDENT: No, it isn't that as much as it is — well, or whatever the cost might be and being able to give them military intelligence and to help with military planning.

Q: One of the conditions, sir, the United States has set for Nicaragua is the holding of free elections. If free elections were held and the Sandinistas won would we accept the result?

THE PRESIDENT: I think we'd have to. This would — then we'd be back to a case similar to the Philippines in which the whole goal of the revolution and of the negotiations would be a government that would be chosen by the people of Nicaragua.

Remember that the contras are supporting a guarantee that was given to the Organization of American States of what the revolution against Somoza was supposed to gain. They provided that information to the Organization of American States when they asked the Organization to try and persuade Somoza to step down to end the killing. And he did. But before they asked him to, the organization asked the revolutionaries to give them what were their revolutionary goals. And they were provided, and the goals were a pluralistic, democratic society, free speech, freedom of religion, all the things that go with democracy. And it was the Sandinistas, as one faction of the revolution, that ousted

their fellow revolutionaries when they got control — took over and installed a totalitarian communist regime. Now, the contras say what they want is to get back to the original goal which requires letting the people of that country make the decisions to how they want to be governed.

Q: Mr. President, in your current campaign to try to raise votes for the contra aid next week, you and some of your aides have been emphasizing that the people who

don't support you on this are going to be held accountable by history or by whomever for their failure to back you up on it. And my question is since this includes a lot of Republicans, as well as Democrats, whether you're going to be unwilling to support in the coming congressional election those people who don't support you on this vote?

THE PRESIDENT: No, and I think — let me — no, I think the thing has been — that whole question has kind of been exaggerated into assailing the motives of the people that would vote against us. Well, we're not doing anything of the kind. What we're pointing out is what I said earlier — that the choice here is either negotiations leading to a political settlement, or this cancer continuing to grow — what we're trying to point out is that this isn't an argument about two methods of dealing with the problem — if one wanted to do one thing and wanted another but the goals were the same. What we're trying to make them realize is that it's an either-or situation. Either we are able to press them into negotiating and coming to a political settlement, or they remain a communist base, another Cuba.

Q: Does that mean you won't have any political hard feelings toward Republicans who don't back you up on this?

THE PRESIDENT: I think I'd better — I'd just better swallow hard and not answer a question like that.

Q: Mr. President, in reaction to your order that the Soviets have to reduce their mission at the United Nations, the Soviets have sent up a formal protest note and said that such actions as that "do not create the climate for a summit." Do you have any comment on that?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. So far we have not heard — or I have not certainly heard of anything from the general secretary [of the Soviet Communist Party, Mikhail S. Gorbachev]. But, remember, this isn't like an embassy where there is retaliation or — this is the one place — the United Nations — and it is the only one and it is here in our country. And they have a delegation that is larger than the next two delegations to them put together. And there is no way that you can justify the size of their delegation here except that they have other goals than just the —

Q: In other words, they are spies. Is that what you are saying, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, and I think that we have — we have enough knowledge of their actions to know that they are there for that purpose — for other purposes and for espionage, not for the doings of the United Nations.

Q: Mr. President, it does seem, though, that the promise of Geneva just six months ago is largely unfulfilled right now. Arms control talks have bogged down; there is inability to set the date for a new summit, and now the staff reductions. Has a new chill entered U.S.-Soviet relations?

THE PRESIDENT: No, this project has been on our minds for quite some time. The arms talk — I still continue to be hopeful because the general secretary, in his proposals — this is the first time I can recall any Soviet leader actually being willing to eliminate weapons they already have. And we in turn accepted a great many of their figures and their proposals, but there were

— it's a complicated thing because we don't both have the same numbers of the same kinds of weapons, and so we then put in some — taking their proposal in which, as I say, in overall terms, 50 percent reduction, ultimate elimination, and so forth we accepted.

We put in some other things that we thought were essential to such a program, and there were no further negotiations. In other words, they have, at the moment — seem to be in a position in which we accept their offer entirely or else. And we think that negotiations mean that you try to find a common meeting ground on some differences that you may have in there on figures. And we have not had a response. We put before our people there in Geneva the framework for meeting their proposal and with some changes that we felt should be made because of fairness and expediting the program, and we've had no response.

Q: Well, I mean, is it your sense, though, that this six months post-summit period has been as hopeful as you had thought it might be, or has it, in fact, been something of a downer for you, a disappointment?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we didn't come home with any euphoria or anything from that meeting. We did come home pleased with the fact that they had agreed and shown an agreement to have future meetings. We don't think that's been done away with.

But, also we've had people over there — Charlie Wick has had people with him over there on the matter of exchange, cultural exchange and youth exchange and all of this. And, apparently, they were better meetings than we've ever had in the past with them. He met with officials at extremely high levels. They were most enthusiastic about wanting to go forward with these exchanges.

So — and the fact that I have a communications channel to the general secretary. No, I think that the conditions are better than they had been before.

Q: Mr. President, the general secretary links a summit and progress on arms control and, on the other hand, does not seem to have loosened the strings of his negotiators in Geneva. Do you think that Mr. Gorbachev really wants a arms control agreement, and do you think he really wants a summit this year?

THE PRESIDENT: I have to say his willingness and his eagerness to have us come there in the following year leads me to believe that nothing has changed on that.

With regard to arms control, yes, because I think he is very much aware of the economic situation in his country and the part that their massive military buildup has played in that economic problem. And I think that he would much prefer to have practical arms agreements, arms reduction agreements rather than to face a continued arms race.

Q: Sir, may I ask you, have you a deadline for setting the date for a summit meeting? Must it be done, for example, before you go to the economic summit meeting [in early May]?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I haven't asked for the that kind of a deadline. We've made it plain to them that it would be very difficult, inconvenient for us to — the one hint that was put out by them on possibly September or later, well, we have an election in our country. Now, I know they don't understand our elections as much as they should, not having free elections of their own. But we've explained it. It must be earlier before we actually get into the full extent of that election campaign.

Q: Is it at all possible that you could meet after the

election?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't — we haven't — I suppose, but by that time, we're getting pretty late in the year. We'd listen to that and look at it. I hadn't thought about anything after that time.

Q: But your preference is still June or July?

THE PRESIDENT: Or July, yes.

Q: Mr. President, may I ask you a question about the Strategic Defense Initiative? If some parts of it prove feasible earlier than others, would you be in favor of deploying those parts when they are feasible, such as the protection of ground-based — or ground-based protection of our Minuteman and MX missiles.

THE PRESIDENT: I'd have to seriously think about that because I have already said, and I told General Secretary Gorbachev, that we viewed this as a defense for all of mankind and as something that could easily make it possible and practical for the elimination of nuclear weapons every place.

To go forward with a deployment without a lot of further meetings and exchanges would then appear that we might be seeking to get a first-strike advantage. And I think that would be the most dangerous thing in the world, for either one of us to be seen as having the capacity for a first strike.

Q: So your inclination would be to wait until the whole thing is both feasible and negotiable?

THE PRESIDENT: Of if whatever, as you say, in part became feasible, OK, then go earlier to both our allies and to the others and say, "Look, here is the potential now for this weapon and we want it to be used for all mankind," and see what we could work out.

Q: Mr. President, one other thing — you have spoken of a proportional response to the Soviet's treaty violations as you see them. And yet, you haven't announced that response yet. Is it about — are we about to have it sprung on us soon?

THE PRESIDENT: Well — [laughter]

Q: Have you decided?

THE PRESIDENT: We haven't sat down actually with regard to theirs and what our response would be. But this one, on this one, this only has to deal with the SALT II.

Q: Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: The other thing, the nuclear test ban — this one, we're willing to meet them on that except that we can't get a satisfactory answer yet on real verification. Now, we have offered to let them come here with whatever equipment they wanted to bring and be witness to one of our underground tests. This is a treaty where we think they have been in violation. It's rather difficult to determine from the great distance whether they've exceeded the agreement on the size of the explosion. And we would want better verification before we go forward with some of these.

Q: Well, could we be sure of the safety and reliability of our weapons if we abandon all testing — if there were a comprehensive ban?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I think the greatest — here's where again that their proposal is unfair to us. It's in the time that they set. They are ahead of us in modernizing and expanding their weapon systems, developing new ones. We're still playing catch up. They have tested and are now deploying their modernized and their newer weapons. For us to stop where we're still playing catch up leaves us in a position of increased inferiority to them. And it wouldn't be fair for us until we've made the same tests comparatively with our — that they have

made with their new and improved modernized weapons. Then we could talk, but with better verification than we now have — we could talk such a test ban.

Q: Mr. President, on the space shuttle disaster, our paper had a story last week that the White House had issued a national security decision directive in 1984 which targeted 24 shuttle missions a year and operating in the black for the shuttle program. Do you believe that the kind of pressure that that put on the space — on the shuttle program could have been, in any way, responsible for what happened down there?

THE PRESIDENT: No, and we have never done anything except to approve their schedule. They have told us what they were capable of doing, and I have put out a thing like — that we want it by a certain time down the years here, if possible to have a manned space station. And this is a program that I've announced and they were to go after it, but we have never, ever — and I — some of those rumors that came out that we had insisted on this particular launching. We have never from here suggested or pushed them for a launch of the shuttle. I would — good Lord, I would feel that I was way out of my depth in trying to do that. I am not a scientist and they are. They're the judge of that.

Q: Immediately after this happened, you responded to your conversations with the families of some of the victims and said that you were determined that the program would go forward in view of things that have been discovered by your commission since then, and in view of some of the statements by the astronauts themselves that they had serious reservations about the safety of the program based on what they learned — two things: do you think that the public relations aspect of it in which teachers, journalists and others would go along should be continued or curtailed under those circumstances.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we want the program. When I responded to the — I responded to the families. Every family — those people that I talked to in their conversation — they made it plain to me that they felt this program had to continue, that this was what their loved ones, now departed, would have wanted. And they wanted me to tell them, and I told them, yes, it will, yes, we have no intention of canceling the program because of this tragedy.

You know, when you look at it, you have 24 times right and one accident — one wrong — you can't cancel out the program. But I have also said since, and we have all agreed here, that now that these things are coming out, that the program must rectify all these shortcomings that had never before been mentioned so that we know that the safety factor that should be there is there.

Q: Well, do you think that those civilians should still be allowed to —

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, yes, you asked about that. Yes. You know, from the very beginning — almost the very beginning, once we established that it was practical — there have been people up there conducting experiments — scientists, for example — who are not astronauts, but who are there to carry on the great advances that have come to us by way of those shuttle experiments — in medicine and other things — are so great that I don't see any reason why this policy should not continue.

Q: And so you think that teachers and journalists and those should go, too?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that all of them — you have to look at each one to see, does it have some value or is it just publicity. Everything that has been done so far, there seemed to be a logical value in this. You know,

here we have a privately supported junior astronaut program in our country that has become quite a feature of our educational system and all. And so I think that you — I think that every case should be looked at as to what was the possible value of having a civilian along, but I don't think we should just blanket it that only astronauts are going up there to loose satellites and do things of that kind. The experiments that can be conducted and the things that we've learned from that program — things that have to do with heart ailments, the possibility that we now have of a medicine for the first time to cure diabetes that can only be produced in outer space.

Q: Well, do you think we should build a new shuttle to replace Challenger or lay off some of those assignments on unmanned missions?

THE PRESIDENT: I would — I haven't had a chance to talk with the people involved there about three [shuttles in operation] and what the difference would be between three and four myself. And I would be more or less inclined to go by the information that they might have as to what would be the setback in having 25 percent of the flying force eliminated.

LARRY M. SPEAKES: Mr. President, we're cutting into your next appointment here.

Q: Could I just — you could use the word "shortcomings," Mr. President, with the shortcomings that have come out in the course of this investigation. Is it your feeling at this point now, after having seen what has evolved in the course of the presidential commission's study, that in fact there were shortcomings in the way that NASA has handled this particular —

THE PRESIDENT: I think I'm going to — all I know are the things that we keep hearing about. I'm going to have to wait until I actually hear from the commission and their evaluation of what they've learned, and the fact that astronauts have said there were other potential liabilities that they had become aware of. Let's read out on all of those.

We do know now that the — while we're still waiting to have it actually declared what was the cause of this tragedy — we still know that the rings on those two particular rockets are affected by cold. Experiments have revealed that. So, whether that turns out to be the ultimate cause or not, it ought to be something that we find an answer to.

Q: It does appear, though, that what's transpired in the aftermath of the tragedy has been concern on your part about procedures, if not knowing for sure, but concern, is that true?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I would — I think what — or as far as anyone can know, you know. There's a limit beyond which you can't go. Anyone who gets in an airplane knows that, that there are things that can happen.

Q: Mr. President, thank you for your time, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Well thank you. I think I'll leave that to you or I'm going to tear my —

Q: Mr. President, are you going to make it over to Maryland to campaign for your former staffer, Linda Chavez [who is seeking a U.S. Senate seat]?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, she — (inaudible) — with the nomination first.

Q: Oh — (inaudible) — get you into that.

THE PRESIDENT: No, I can't participate in primaries.

Q: Thanks a lot.